

Text for sermon preached by
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St. Paul's Church, Concord, NH
July 21, 2002

GOSPEL: Matthew 13: 24 - 30, 36 - 43

Matt 13:24 (NRSV) He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27 And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' 28 He answered, "An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?' 29 But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 30 Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."

36 Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." 37 He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; 38 the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40 Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, 42 and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

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Pentecost IX, Proper 11

O Lord, save us from the arrogance of “knowing,” and give us the humility which comes with remembering our need of You. Amen.

I've got a problem in my garden. This spring we planted some new bulbs, Montbretia, and in the space clearly demarcated for their growth, there are two kinds of plants. One of them is Montbretia; one of them is weeds. The problem is: I don't know which is which!

Not unlike the parable Jesus told about the kingdom. In it, the servants note that two kinds of plants are growing in the field: Wheat, and something which (at least in the first few months) looks like wheat. In fact, it's a weed which grows in that part of the world called “bearded darnel,” which looks exactly like wheat for a long time. When it finally heads out, its seed head is smaller than that of the wheat, and upon harvest, it can be sifted out – which is a good thing, because this weed can cause mild nausea in those who eat it. In Jesus' parable, the workers, in their exuberance to purify the crop, want to rush in and pull out the darnel. But the Master says, “No, you'll uproot the wheat. Wait. We'll take care of it at harvest time. It's going to turn out all right. The wheat will be gathered in the barn, and we'll burn the noxious weeds.” And by the way, you can almost hear the Master saying, “How are you going to tell the weeds from the wheat?!”

You might be thinking that this parable is about evil in the world. It is. And God sends the rain on the just and the unjust – no matter how much it drives us crazy or how unfair it seems. You might be thinking this parable is about the cause of evil in the world. Which it is. And although I have a hard time imagining the devil, I know that evil can become so big, and so present, that it's hard not to posit an evil mastermind behind it.

But for me, this parable, spoken by our Lord two millennia ago, is about arrogance and humility. Too much arrogance and too little humility in our lives as individuals, too much arrogance and too little humility in the Church, and too much arrogance and too little humility in America.

Arrogance, we all know, is the irritating air of one who exaggerates his/her own worth or contribution or knowledge. More specifically, according to Merriam Webster, to “arrogate” is to make undue claims or to seize without justification. And of all the things Jesus condemns, of all the things that make him angry, arrogance and self-righteousness are at the top of his list! And it occurs right in the middle of this parable when the servants assume that THEY can tell the difference between the wheat and the weeds. THEY know the difference between the good guys and the bad guys – and in their zeal to purge the weeds from the field, they threaten to destroy the wheat in the process. They have arrogated to themselves the ability and wisdom to tell good from evil. (Remember the Garden of Eden, and the Tree of Good and Evil of which we were not permitted to eat?)

I hate this parable, because on an interpersonal level, I do this all the time! Don't you? We make judgments about people all the time – assume we know the motives behind the actions of another – make all kinds of judgments about the family next door, the mother on welfare, the man who has AIDS, the refugee who shows up at the Care Center, or the Enron executive facing a Congressional hearing – when in fact we know little about what is going on with these folk. But that doesn't seem to stop our judging them.

In the Church, liberals malign conservatives, Anglo-Catholics barely tolerate evangelicals, and mainstream Christians are quick to dismiss fundamentalists. And vice versa, I might add. People who applaud

the ordination of women have long ago written off those for whom it is still troublesome, heretical and painful. And vice versa. People who believe the Church should be fully inclusive of gay and lesbian folk believe that those who oppose their full inclusion are simply mean-spirited, and those who oppose it accuse the liberals of abandoning the authority of scripture. More often than not, each side in these debates would just as soon rip the other side out of the field by their roots.

The parable says to BOTH sides in these debates: Don't be so sure you KNOW who are the weeds and who are the wheat. Don't presume to know what is right. Say what you believe. Talk, discuss, fight even. But don't claim to KNOW what God wants. Learn to exist together as the Body of Christ. Give it time. Disagree, even vehemently, but treat each other with respect. Fight if you must, but keep coming to this communion rail together to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. And in time, it'll be sorted out. In the end, it's gonna be okay. Because God is in charge, and GOD DOES KNOW the weeds from the wheat.

This parable says to me: Gene Robinson, don't be so sure of yourself. You know God, but you can only know a tiny piece of the ultimate mystery of God, so don't arrogate to yourself the knowledge of good and evil. Instead, with a humble heart, admit you don't know everything, humbly work out your salvation with fear and trembling (not certainty), and treat those whom you regard as weeds in the field with special respect, lest in trying to root them out you harm the Body of Christ you so love.

Although it's not an easy thing to listen to, I think this parable has a message for us globally as well. In the aftermath of September 11th, America is in great danger – not just from Al-Qaida, but in danger of becoming arrogant. We're the biggest kid on the block. In fact, we're the ONLY big kid on the block, and we have the might to do anything we want. So we are at risk for becoming arrogant – arrogating to ourselves the unilateral power of deciding who are the good guys and who are the bad. Actually, our track record in this regard isn't all that good. It seems pretty clear to us today that Osama bin Laden is a bad guy – but a decade ago, when we branded Russia as the evil empire, we funded, trained and supported bin Laden in his fight against the Russians.

And now, this wonderful and great country of ours, which has always championed democracy and sought to deal with democratically elected leaders, has now, unilaterally, decided that democratically-elected Yassir Arafat is the wrong leader for the Palestinians. I don't know if he is or not! But I am alarmed when our President declares that he KNOWS that the Palestinians would be better served by a different leader. What if the next person elected is from the militant group Hamas?! When we stop having an opinion about something, and start claiming to KNOW it, we are on a slippery slope.

Don't get me wrong. There IS evil in the world. I flew into New York City on the morning of September 11th, and with my own eyes I saw evil crashing into those two towers of steel and humanity. We're apt to see it again. And we must protect ourselves from it as best we can. But in our war on terrorism, let us be careful that the violence we do in routing out the Al-Qaida "weeds" of the world doesn't destroy us in the process. We want to be safe, but let's not give up our values and ideals in doing so. Let us not, as a nation, arrogate to ourselves the infallible knowledge of good and evil. Only God can fulfill that role.

This parable also speaks to me on a personal level – and here may be the key to understanding this relationship between arrogance and humility. It's easy for me to see how the field, which contains wheat AND weeds, is ME, and MY life. I am BOTH. I do a lot of good; sometimes I say just the right thing; a good part of the time I walk with Jesus and know God and am moved by the Holy Spirit. But sometimes, I'm a stinker, a rat, a sinner lost in my own weakness. Or to put it in St. Paul's words, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." (Romans 7:19)

I am both weeds and wheat. When I convince myself that I'm all wheat and no weeds, I am arrogant. When I make my enemies into all weeds, and no wheat, I am arrogant. But when I remember that I am both wheat and weeds, good and evil, then I am more humble about my own life and not so judgmental of others. When I remember how complex I am, how mixed my own motives, then I can better avoid stereotyping or caricaturing those with whom I disagree. When I remember the weeds and faults and shortcomings in my own life, I'm less likely to project my evil onto others, and more likely to seek and serve Christ in them, as I have promised in my baptismal vows.

And when I remember that I am both weeds and wheat, I remember my own need of God. And I think that's the key to avoiding arrogance and embracing a healthy kind of humility. It's what Jesus meant in the Beatitudes when he said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" – that is, blessed are those who know their need of God. The arrogant man who criticizes the splinter in another's eye while ignoring the plank in his own, has forgotten his need of God. The arrogant older brother who resents the Prodigal Son's return home is blind to his own hardness of heart, and has forgotten that the Father loves them BOTH. The men who are ready to stone the woman caught in adultery forget their own sins, and in wanting to stone her, threaten to pull up the roots of their own virtue.

The good news is that the harvest of your life and mine is not yet here. There is time. We are "works in progress." God is patient and kind. If we acknowledge our need of God, our sin is forgiven, and we are empowered to love the world in His Name – as individuals, as brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ, and as our beloved country in the community of nations. In acknowledging our need of God, we avoid arrogating to ourselves the knowledge of good and evil, and instead embrace humility and the miracle that "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

The good news of this parable is: Let God worry about who are weeds and who are wheat. In time it will be clear. In time, all will be well. Because God is in charge. And God WILL have the last word. And for that, we can be truly thankful. Amen.